

New approach to primary care: Build your own facility

By [Beth Fitzgerald](#)

June 2, 2014

Tired of battling rising health care costs, Unite Here — the union that represents Atlantic City's casino service workers — decided to take matters into its own hands:

It opened its own health care center.

The Unite Here Health — Health Center, essentially a primary care medical practice, opened in early May in Atlantic City to serve the 20,000 union members and their families covered by Unite Here.

“The only way to take control of our health care costs and the quality of care was by opening up our own health care center,” Local 54 President Bob McDevitt said.

Last month, the union held a grand opening and dedicated the new center to Betsy Gilbertson, a union official who has spent several years exploring a new strategy for health care for the union.

“There is no way this would have happened without her vision and her strategic approach,” McDevitt said.

Unite Here began partnering more than a year ago with the Continuum Health Alliance, leading experts in medical practice management that advise medical practices throughout the state on ways to improve their financial and clinical operations.



Christopher Olivia

Christopher Olivia, Continuum's president, said the fit made sense.

“Their goal is to provide better access to care for their members,” he said. “Essentially their goal is the same as ours.”

Olivia hopes there will be a lower overall cost of care because there is better access and coordination in the ambulatory setting.

“We have a pretty good track record in that regard of lowering the overall cost of care,” he said.

McDevitt said the Unite Here local has about 12,000 members, and about 10,000 live close enough to the health center to use it as their primary care practice.

The union would not reveal any of the costs associated with building or running the facility, but McDevitt said the union has been working for years to rein in medical costs, and he said the employer pays on average \$8,500 per worker for coverage, which is lower than many other plans.

“It is not like we just started to be hands-on — we have been doing it for the past decade, as a survival instinct,” McDevitt said. “The health center is a culmination of all that we have learned about providing quality health care that works for our members.

“(The center) is as comprehensive as we can make it: three primary care doctors and a pharmacy that provides a lot of generics.”

The center, he said, also includes a chiropractor, a physical therapist and a podiatrist. It may expand to cardiology and pediatrics.

McDevitt said the key is to provide comprehensive, convenient care — the center opens at 7 a.m., six days a week, with half the slots reserved for walk-ins. That aims to keep people well, rather than cure them once they get sick, he said.

“We think it will have a real impact on slowing down the cost (increases) and we believe that we can reverse the trend to some extent over the next four to five years,” he said.

Linda Schwimmer, vice president of the New Jersey Health Care Quality Institute, said the center has the perfect approach.

“It is a perfect model of where an employee and employer can have a very successful workplace wellness initiative, but in this more global sense in terms of focusing on the care you are paying for and making sure you get quality care to your members,” she said.

E-mail to: beth@njbiz.com